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The Presidency

by HUGH SIDNEY

Over the hot line— the Middle East

Lyndon Johnson had stayed close to the mansion on Sunday. He watched the latest news from the Middle East but went to bed not expecting anything drastic to happen.

The city settled down to a marvelously balmy night, one of those that should have been along several weeks before. Walt Rostow, Johnson's special assistant for national security affairs, even stayed home with his family and was ready to call it a day at 11 p.m.

There was no particular excitement in the Situation Room in the basement of the White House's West Wing. The men on duty monitoring the cable machines bringing in the secret dispatches from diplomats and intelligence sources were, of course, specially watchful because of the Middle East, but as midnight came and went there was nothing to alarm them.

The phone beside Rostow's bed jangled at 2:50. He noted down the time because he is trained to keep records of such times. "We have an F.B.I.S. [Foreign Broadcasting Information Service, a C.I.A. monitoring operation] report that the U.A.R. has launched an attack on Israel," came a husky male voice from the Situation Room. Rostow was immediately wide awake. "Go to your intelligence sources and call me back." At 3 the phone rang and all the sources checked confirmed the first flash. "O.K., I'm coming in," said Rostow, who asked for a White House limousine to be sent to his home. Sunk in the back seat of the black Mercury as it sped through the deserted streets, Rostow began his calculations. First find out how it started. Then find out the precise situation on the ground and in the air. Determine who is involved. Finally, decide about waking President Johnson. He made no notes, just put the procedure down in his mind.

By 3:25 he was in the Situation Room and on the phone to Secretary of State Dean Rusk at home. "I assume you've received the flash," Rostow began. Rusk had. Rostow told the Secretary that he was gathering all the facts he could to have available when he talked with Johnson. Rusk and Rostow agreed that if the

preliminary information was true L.B.J. should be awakened in about one hour.

At first the facts came in a trickle. There had been sirens heard in Tel Aviv, then in Cairo. The Situation Room tickers bring regular news reports in addition to dispatches from diplomats and intelligence operations. In the next minutes the trickle of information began to swell. Tanks were reported in various locations. Then secret sources noted that a number of Arab air fields appeared to be inoperative and the pattern of attack began to emerge. The Israelis, whether first to strike or not, were moving hard and fast against the U.A.R. Air Forces.

In the conference area of the Situation Room, a bleak chamber with a map of Vietnam still on the wall, Rostow picked up the phone. "I want to get through to the President," he said. "I wish him to be awakened."

A hundred yards away on the second floor of the darkened White House a white phone jingled. Lyndon Johnson, long accustomed to calls in the night said simply, "Yes."

"Mr. President," said his assistant. "This is Walt. I have the following to report. We have information that Israel and the U.A.R. are at war." Johnson wanted to know the facts and Rostow ran down them quickly, the President asking questions throughout in the seven-minute conversation that launched Johnson into the tensest week of his presidency.

He wanted to be certain that United States ambassadors implemented plans to get our citizens out of danger. And then he asked that every scrap of information be assembled and evaluated so he would

As the cables continued to stack up, other men routed from their beds began to arrive. Press Secretary George Christian and his assistant Tom Johnson were there shortly after 4:30. Clark Clifford, head of Johnson's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, came in to help with evaluation. The only thing that these men had done before leaving their homes was to shave. Now they needed a little sustenance. The coffee machine which sits beside the special teletypes was stoked up. A man was sent out to the street to find a restaurant which would sell them some rolls.

From his bedroom, Lyndon Johnson talked by phone with Rusk and McNamara and then he summoned George Christian. Then some time around 8 on the Situation Room tickers came an electrifying message. The hot line between Washington and Moscow was about to be activated—by Moscow. It was to be the first official use of this crisis device. Immediately a Russian translator was summoned to the White House basement. Once again Rostow was on the phone to the President, telling him of this development. L.B.J., still in his bedroom, did not change expression as he heard the news. He put down the phone and without a word of explanation to Christian, said, "We've got to go to the Situation Room." By the time L.B.J. had taken his small elevator to the first floor, walked through the silent White House, the first brief message from Moscow, signed by Premier Alexei Kosygin, was waiting in rough translation. Lyndon Johnson took the typed document. He settled down at the mahogany table and began to formulate a reply.

In his first message, Kosygin spoke of the terribly dangerous situation which had arisen in the Middle East and the necessity that Russia and the U.S. not get involved. Johnson's reply was cautious, echoing Kosygin's position that the two major powers should stay beyond the battle. The two men were feeling each other out.

A second flurry of exchanging messages the U.A.R. made its wild charges that the U.S. and British planes had helped Israel. Over the hot line, Johnson and Kosygin gave assurances that neither was getting involved in the shooting. Hours later, as the course of the war became clear, Russia proposed a cease fire and Johnson answered its proposals with our own.

On Wednesday morning came the tense moment when Johnson learned that the U.S. ship *Liberty* had been hit. Not knowing yet what really had happened, the President ordered U.S. planes to scramble to look for survivors and rushed a message to Kosygin explaining that the planes were not going to battle. While that was clattering out to Moscow, Israel admitted that it was responsible. Johnson, who was in the Situation Room, added this new information. Kosygin acknowledged it immediately.

There were more than a dozen messages in this first, historic hot-line exchange. The President now keeps them all—his own messages, Kosygin's messages in the original Russian with the translations on an opposite page—at his desk in a green notebook.

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